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EDITORIAL

Professional learning: empowering teachers?

AQ2   As I began to think about writing this editorial I reflected on my own thoughts, concerns and beliefs about professional learning in an attempt to come up with a key issue which might challenge current conversations around professional learning. This follows on from the previous   5
editorial by Professor Howard Stevenson who argued for a focus on a wider set of questions on the purpose and possibilities of professional learning. In this Editorial, I would like to challenge our thinking about professional learning and its ability or inability to empower teachers to make a difference.

   Many of us as teachers or teacher educators entered the profession to make a difference.   10
We had a moral purpose. For me that moral purpose was and continues to be about inclusion and enabling all learners to be active participants in our schools, communities and wider society. This involves focusing on learners' individual strengths and engaging them in learning that is meaningful to them in their context. However, this is often at odds with values at a system level where education can be seen in a reductionist manner primarily focused on   15
improving outcomes and standards to enhance the knowledge economy.

   We have seen this emphasis on education for the knowledge economy across the globe with several countries competing for one of the top places on internationally benchmarked assessments such as PISA (Sellar and Lingard 2013). This striving for competitive advantage is reflected in the plethora of education policies focused on school improvement to raise   20
standards in literacy, numeracy and science with comparative lip service afforded to issues of equity and inclusion despite increasingly diverse classrooms and rising poverty and homelessness in many countries. So how do we empower our teachers and teacher educators to stay close to their moral purpose; how can we challenge the status quo when the system seems to be at odds with our values and beliefs? For teachers and teacher educators this dissonance can   25
lead to a professional identity crisis resulting in what Jack Whitehead (1989) termed a 'living contradiction'. Resolving this arguably forms part of our ethical code as professionals and becomes part of our professional identity.

   Central to this endeavour for me was and continues to be professional learning. Throughout all stages of my career, professional learning has empowered me to stay close to my moral   30
purpose for teaching and learning. It has enabled me to have challenging and courageous conversations about teaching and learning and helped me articulate my values and beliefs around the purpose of education. Professional learning enabled me to become aware of my own positionality in terms of how my values and beliefs intersect with the wider professional and political contexts at the various levels of the system (Forde and Torrance 2017). In turn, this   35
has empowered me to find ways through which I can use my agency to make changes to align my values and practice. Noteworthy is that this has been a collective endeavour requiring a focus not only on developing my own human capital but also social capital. This is particularly important in the context of inclusion which requires social learning processes to influence attitudes, beliefs and practices (Ainscow and Sandill 2010).   40

   Collaborative models of professional learning and dialogue are central to this endeavour. However, teachers and teacher educators continue to struggle to find the time and space for 'critical conversations' (Ryan 2014) and 'complicated discussions' (Lopez 2014) despite critical dialogue being seen as one of the most important pedagogies of effective teacher learning (Parker et al. 2016). This is hardly surprising given that the system through its various policies   45

promotes competition over cooperation and, in many countries, judges individual teacher performance through a high stakes accountability agenda. However, the articles in this issue may help us to navigate this complex terrain through discussions of the challenging issues along with suggestions of ways forward.

The first paper by Mowat and McMahon (Scotland) explores the importance of teachers as activists and change agents at all stages of their careers. The authors point to the equity, excellence and inclusivity agenda and highlight that successful school systems are characterised by systems-led approaches to improvement which emphasise teacher capability, autonomy and agency. However, while highlighting that individual teachers may be empowered to use their agency, they question if schools and school systems are ready for these teachers. The authors grapple with these tensions and call for further attention to the wider cultural context and norms within the institution and across the system to reconcile the needs of the individual and the needs of the system thus highlighting the importance of critical dialogue.

The theme of agency and initiating relationships with others is continued in the second and third papers by Sela and Harel (Israel) and Kupila and Karila (Finland), respectively. Both papers focus on early career teachers and highlight the importance of teachers taking responsibility for their own professional learning, initiating conversations and fostering interpersonal relationships with peers, students and parents in their school community. The importance of collaborative relationships between beginning teachers and university teacher educators is the focus of Coenders and Verhoef's (Netherlands) paper which explores the lesson study model of collaborative professional learning. In all papers, these relationships were deemed significant in helping teachers to develop their own identity and practices in line with their values and beliefs to avoid Whitehead's living contradiction. The consistent collaborative dialogue and challenging conversations around student learning supported these early career teachers' professional learning and sense of empowerment. Perhaps the challenge for us to consider is how to sustain this critical dialogue past the early career stages.

The next three papers in this issue may offer some insights here where the focus is on dialogue in teacher communities. Dogan, Yurtseven and Tatıket (Turkey) unpack the concept of reflective dialogue within schools as a professional learning activity. They argue that collaborative reflective dialogue, as distinct from reflective practice, generates and reinforces core beliefs, norms, and values of the community allowing teachers to think and re-think fundamental issues in teaching and learning. The authors call for providing time, using protocols and repeated instances for such collaborative reflective dialogue along with a clear predetermined agenda or topic to support changes in school culture and practice. Similarly, Alles, Seidel and Groschner (Germany) call for the use of discourse norms and a facilitator in a video-based teacher learning community to facilitate critical discussions centred on existing teaching practices and developing new competencies and teaching alternatives. Meanwhile, Kirkby, Walsh and Keary (Australia) highlight the effectiveness of an inter-professional community of practice involving early childhood teachers and health professionals for creating a disruption or discontinuity of practice whereby teachers question their existing practices and explore new competencies.

While dialogue and critical conversations seem to be empowering for many of the teachers in the above papers the next two papers highlight the need for a leader to foster a conversation culture and learning atmosphere. While the position of the instructional leader in Campbell, Chaseling, Boyd and Shipway's paper came in response to a concern over Australia's position in global rankings of education, the authors discuss the impact of such a role on having 'reflective practice analysis conversations' to support the enhancement of teaching and learning in schools. Close and Kendrick's paper (UK) focuses on a framework for the professional learning needs of specialist leaders of education by exploring values and change at the micro, meso and macro levels. The authors argue for its relevance in terms of

considering the kind of system leaders in a democratic society that values education as a public service which reflects the concern highlighted in the first paper around system-level needs and individual needs.

At system level, professional learning is widely accepted as an essential part of achieving school improvement with the individual teacher seen as the most influential factor within the school for learner outcomes. However, much professional learning focuses on developing human capital in terms of individual teachers' knowledge and skills and often, in reality, is conceived as something that is 'done' to teachers (Timperley *et al.* 2007) in line with a national agenda. Noteworthy is the lack of accountability in some systems around the impact of such professional learning and development that is 'done' to teachers. In contrast, affording teacher autonomy and agency around professional learning is valued in some systems, but with this autonomy comes accountability for the quality of professional learning and student outcomes. A recent focus on impact by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2016) has created a sense of urgency around accountability at all levels of the system for professional learning. However, despite evidence that evaluating the impact of professional learning leading to greater outcomes for teachers and students many, at various levels of the system, feel they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to do so.

The final two papers explore formal approaches to evaluations of teacher professional learning. In keeping with the theme of agency and empowering teachers to take responsibility for their own professional learning, McChesney and Aldridge (Australia) discuss '*A review of practitioner-led evaluation of teacher professional development*'. The authors highlight a significant disconnect between existing theoretical frameworks in the literature and approaches used in schools along with teacher capacity issues related to data use and evaluations. However, they emphasize the importance of teacher agency and teachers' professionalism in inviting them '*to give an account (rather than insisting that they be held to account*' (p. ???) and that such evaluations be considered formatively and not just summatively to enhance the impact on teaching and learning. The final paper by Godfrey et al. (UK) focuses on evaluation for '*improving rather than proving*' (p. ???) and adopts a rigorous developmental approach to evaluation that schools can easily adopt. However, the need for support for this approach from university staff members was highlighted along with building capacity in schools for engaging in a process of improvement.

Evident in all papers is the importance of teachers engaging in professional learning focused on collaborative discourse related to teaching and learning, thus empowering teachers to take ownership of their own practice and narrow the values-practice gap related to their moral purpose of teaching and learning. Consideration and understanding of system level and individual needs has been highlighted and it is hoped that readers will be empowered through engagement with these articles to reflect on these issues and consider their own values and practice in relation to teaching and learning. Furthermore, it is hoped that readers may look for the chink amidst the plethora of policies from above to use their agency to challenge existing orthodoxies related to professional learning and further align their values and practice in an effort to make a difference.

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